

*MY BELOVED
PARISHIONERS*

MY BELOVED PARISHIONERS

The television—an old blurred early color version—blared out the news. It did that every day. Today, David Brinkley announced that George Moscone and Harvey Milk had been shot. David Brinkley: “Milk was the first gay elected public official in the country.” None of this was conceivable. It was so far removed, like an undiscovered planet, from conceivability, that it simply wasn’t conceivable (I’m not going to apologize for my tautologies at this time in my life, I am forty and have traveled on every continent of the earth and am tired). The city’s policies were in absolute critical flux and the nation was watching. So, there was a surety signed and executed in the months and weeks before November 27, 1978. Diane Feinstein still has Dan White’s diaries, and I do not know why. It was ten years and two days to the day that I was born that these two officials were gunned down. At the same time the nation was watching the footage come in of the poisoned dead bodies of Jonestown, Guyana. The footage moved with the camera across the blinking color screen: It was like a weird result of a hail-storm of butchered limbs passing after the storm, bodies complete bodies simply because they were from San Francisco. All of it so fundamental now, having cropped my shy little subconscious just a bit more each time a new war was declared: On crime, on drugs, on teenage pregnancy, on guns, on HIV/AIDS, on terror. Fundamental to a shy child like me even today. Now that they’re gone . . . that is to say the people who understood it, my grandparents, who were both around forty on November 22, 1960, eighteen years earlier. . . now that . . . I mean, they understood and reviled the people of the Milk Dynasty who have been have been posting bond every day since then in the exhilaration of their successful subterfuge. Milk did not like the people whom my grandparents reviled then and he would not like them now. For reasons different from that of my grandparents, but for reasons the same.

I wonder now. I wonder if the divorce courts of those days were really worth it. I wonder what was in the bones of the judges. I wonder if they had bones. I wonder if The Left really knew what it was doing by that time. The emperor has no clothes. They lit up their dim minds and thought like agents of Mao; children turned into bats self-invigorated. The old parishioners of the two wars to end all wars, and then the new security State, saw through it. Perhaps that’s why they loved their grandchildren so much. I think they were afraid that we were already being taken for deer in a deer park and that the world would never let us go and look for the earth. I believe it was difficult for them to countenance it because

they knew that they would be dead before they could help, but I believe that they could deal with it fatalistically because of their particular existential slot in history, which was in deed penultimate. I was “Lex,” you see. Not “Alex,” LEX. It never wavered. Lex was taken to the family doctor to get stitches. Lex was driven to school and picked up from school. Lex was bought a bicycle for Christmas. Lex got to pick the tree and then decorate it. Lex got the new fishing reel and the new fishing rod. Lex got to go to get his new and long-awaited Navy Surplus Jacket where the smell of felting was new and pleasant in the warehouse. Lex got to go to the Sierras to fly-fish. Lex got to go shopping and got to talk to the lady cashiers. Lex got to go to the toy-and-sweets shop below Lucky and buy candy and talk to the old ladies who manned the shop. Lex got to go to half-moon bay and get artichokes and walk along the beach. Lex was taken to the Boy Scout paper drives and the Boy Scout meetings. Lex got to call to the children’s hospital to say hello to his volunteer grandmother. Lex received hugs, kisses, and “love-ya-babe’s.” Well, so much for that. It’s dirt in the water now. Memory is adequate but the senses are like most people: They never understand. At one moment these old parishioners were, at the next they were gone. It was not conceivable for me. It was not a planet that I wanted to acknowledge or discover.

But in the real world alcoholics turn on you. They hate their drudge world, you see. My grandmother was an alcoholic and had been, as she had been a smoker since she was sixteen. She was the most intelligent human being I have ever known: It is still like this and I think it always will be. But in the later years she became who she wasn’t: Mean (or perhaps who she was). My grandfather: “Suffering Jesus,” to her. “City Hall,” she called him. They were like twins after five decades, so he became mean too: Mean to each other, but looking for mutual scapegoats—the climax of their revilement of the international communists and the local (Oakland, San Francisco) dynasty of Milk. Imagine that. I became known to the family as, “Bi-polar.” Never even a false positive on it: No, I was diagnosed as “depressive,” and was told flatly by the psychiatrist that I was not manic, no “Bi-polar.” Another said the same thing years later. The turning though? It had not been conceivable to me. I could not have foreseen it when I was a boy, I still don’t know where it came from even if I recognize it as the factor of alcoholic drudgery, which is equal to a series of sickening denouements which is only concluded by death.

I crashed my car twenty-five years later in a foreign country. I had been staying in a large loft in a hotel in the woods of Eastern Europe. When the snow came down, I was high—I had arranged it with the owner. To be high. And the rate. I had been back—repatriated in absolute terms—from two Persian Gulf countries for just over a year by that time. My corporate tour as a freelance programmer had been eleven months in those badlands of the earth. The mimicry of the lock-downs in those countries was my near-doom upon return from them to a “normal” Europe. I had forgotten how to recognize animated reality: Greenery, earth-colored life, the facial expressions of my child and my wife. I was deracinated because I felt deracinated—torn up inside, I am not quite able to describe it without going into severe mental pain and fatigue. But when I was there, I may have been too shy for Arabia as a natal matter, but I was

a tough bull there and no one could hold me back from making my money and tearing up the town quietly and covertly if it was required to get it. The Indian boy-slaves there were not tough. I don't think they knew the word or had the cultural concept: They aren't cowboys, not that you have to be. They labored and they did bend over for their host-country bosses. Sunil was a sad Christian one—a Cross around his neck on one of the more religiously permissive Island states—who virtually begged (you could say, in his way) to have me send him job opportunities to him once I was back in Europe. Said he'd do any kind of work. Naturally. It would be nice and very literary to act surprised, but no, not me, not now. It was his situation and I did not pity him. He was not my responsibility. He had his living, I had mine. Politeness and mutual respect for one another was all that should have ever been expected. That's life. Unfortunately, so was the car accident in Eastern Europe. I had been whoring that night. I was alone, I was unhappy, and I was desperate for sex. And I was drunk, and then I was fleeced. Returning to get back my stolen possessions, I hit black ice in a very black night on a very blacked-out country road: I never even got a skid at 60 miles an hour on the ice, the car just turned in circles and whacked into the side of the earth. It was like a body-blow with a natural logarithm which God had apparently approved of. There was a series of compression waves that threw my comprehension of the world into the river of Styx. I felt like my mind was being unhinged and my eyeballs dumped into the centrifugal swirl as the metal of the car was rammed and finally defeated (the scratching noise was a very tender horror): The magic interval of delay between onset and onslaught and rest, which is embedded in flashback-replay but otherwise will never have a chance with the ethical face of memory, which is simply normal recall. And yet no one died. Certainly not precious Lex the Unhurtale. Lex just had a brain-shake so he had to keep his head forked in a stupid contraption, which he violently discarded as he told the male nurse to back-off in a language that was not English and not wholly Judo. Lex was released without discharge. They were happy to get him out and they did back off. In all fairness, they were not nice people to begin with. Just scrubs of the earth which I was bound to encounter when ramming into it the way I did and needing to get sucked-off and fleeced by the prostitute and her cohorts the way I did. And the drinking the way I did. And the immorality of my life, and the desperation of its causes, and the gout of its reasons. Portentous characters, all of those. Closed-down now, though. There is a need in one's life—at some point—to close off what I call "the bron-witted season of hate." I did. Another four years, the length of time it takes to get a degree in English, and I closed it off. Hitting the four-o helped that, it snowed on that day. Doesn't it always snow when a man, or a woman, for a woman is a man, she has this advantage, she's husky, and fluid, so when either she or he turns four-o it snows. It doesn't waver. If they are able to make love that day, so much the better: For her, for him, and yes, for world peace. Regardless of whether they're of separate races. One shouldn't have race on the mind—especially a man should not—when honoring a woman's alloy. She's too good for it. Man will never find a gender that will satisfy him more. It's not gonna happen Joe-Joe. It's either a lover-boy or a lover-girl. And if you have any arguments, even transgender is not symmetrical, although it does take care of the particular requirement.

II

When I was a shy child of thirteen I was happy. That is how simple life was. There were people, trees, food, and happiness. I had my own set of cartoon characters (my own comic strip). I was in charge of the dialogue and the still animation. My favorite one was the Misfits: About a bunch of funny cats with mustaches who all thought that they were very cool. There was the boss, there was the dunce, there were the yes-cats, but they were all friends somehow and got a good laugh out of each other: So they let me be one of them, they let me in. I didn't have a character for myself called Lex or anything, but I was right in there with them. All that's required for a universe; it was enough for mine anyway.

Let me get back to Milk. Feinstein said the following in an interview in 2003 on the 25th anniversary of the Moscone-Milk slayings: "I put my finger to see if there was any pulse, and it went in a bullet hole in his chest. I think of it as if it were yesterday. I remember Harvey's body, his blood on me. I see it all." I wonder if she does. I wonder about the doors she actually did walk in to; on more than one level. I am suspicious. I have it as a legacy from the parishioners who looked after me when David Brinkley quietly, winning-out against the blur of the colors on the blipping television—as a gentlemen devoid of grief and shock but not devoid of the recognition for its necessity, told the news of the slayings. I am in possession of an undowried gut: Something was awry. For me it is now like the fifth lake in the city of Copenhagen, I cannot make another correspondence of the whole matter to my adult life: It was the feeling that I got in winter nights on that lake which was the exact same feeling I had when I watched David Brinkley announce the news of the double-slayings of Moscone and Milk. In that posh district of Copenhagen you look out on the fifth and final lake of the series of them and you could see the squawking geese corralled and circled-in by the ice-plates on the lake and rammed up in a cul-de-sac of still-fluid water against the ramparts of the old bridge, when you see it, really, the raunchy white beasts might as well be dead and bloated bodies comically rendered; and more than that even, you might as well be in Moscow or Gdansk; in Gdansk buying amber jewelry in a jewelry shop off the huge square (that repeats itself block by block, so that the main square is a straight line of reproductions of itself that will wear your legs down should you walk long enough) on a little road near one of the cement-block piers where the sea-water is graced with slicks of oil that refract the whole spectrum of visible light, and the smell of tar rather pities the air because it is better than the smell of smog in other cities. You might as well be in one of these two cities for all of the crazy horror of the world-line: Neither of the cities have honest clerics while Copenhagen is virtually ecumenical. That's a very stubborn difference. De Gaulle would have made the same observation, as would have the parishioners, for their generations formed a unique cross-section in Vietnam and Cambodia, and the dying efforts of the parents of the last colonials. He would have thought: "The subtlety of America. And I had to make a martyr of Bastien-Thiry. The idiot." The parishioners would have named actual people and remained knowingly and disdainfully quiet about the rest of it, as if it were a *fait accompli* and as if they had stopped caring anyway. It is amazing. Christopher Moscone, the slain Moscone's son, said of the city that

killed his father: "I love the city, and I hate the city for that." That's complicated, especially when said twenty-five years after-the-fact. It can't be comfortable. Cities and people and legacies and political dynasties: Hence dogs. So where's the jackal I ask myself thirty years later. And I say it with a hardened face with my molars forced up against each other.

Well. In 1980 I entered one of my custom-made cartoon characters into a contest for publicizing the rebuilding and rehabilitation of the San Francisco cable cars, their grids, their pulleys, their old technologies. The cartoon character was a big bird that stood upright with huge angel-wings spread out, and a wide, maniacally happy smile on his face. He was saying: "I know more. I know all about it." Of course it was not in captions, it was written in his enlightened dare-me-if-you-dare face. This is a fact. That's what I wanted his face to say, that's what would take the prize, I felt it in my little bones, my undowried gut. A cable car was in the background propping him up and I had drawn a curved street-banner at the top reading "San Francisco Cable Car" spanning the width of the picture. I won the contest. The parishioners were proud, especially the male one who took me fly-fishing and to Halfmoon bay, who as an engineer admired Lex's artistic talent, was proud of it and boasted about it to his friends; a man who was not in the habit of boasting about his own children. "Damn, Bill," he'd say to Bill Eddie, his friend since childhood: "Look at what Lex did. It's good, Bill." Bill would nod and say, "Sure, Pete." Bill would look over at me and say: "Hey, Lex, that's real good." Then he'd go back to fixing the plumbing underneath the kitchen sink, where the two of them would argue about which tools and parts to use for another hour. "Damn you're stubborn, Bill." "Pete! Leave me alone! I'm turning the screw!" Peg, the female parishioner, my grandmother, would say: "Don't be an ass, Pete." She was heard but would be dutifully ignored by my grandfather.

Life can appear threadbare when it is not. The appearance of an exception is when life can be most interesting and challenging, and survival can seem most elusive and the future is inconceivable. There is "the interesting" at the very time of the challenge as it is experienced and will never be experienced again, and there is the other one: The one that comes after you've survived and a future has finally been conceived. It takes years, many years: The furrows in the balmy skein of your forehead and the lines in your face deepen and are made visible as they never had been, the creases in your hands take on the appearance of crevices. You change. I remember the walks on the roads at night: An old satchel that had belonged to the male parishioner; new leather shoes, a long jacket that had belonged to the male parishioner, some ID, some small cash; young walks in a foreign country in the night, post-communist and rising. The walks got shorter but came-in at further distances as the navigation of the globe became necessary in the search for cash; large wads of it that you could stash with the help of quiet principals and accountants; and the first languages got better, and the next languages got harder to pick up. As it was with the languages, it was with the peoples. It was quite the opposite with material consumption though: Those choices became greater. House, cars, the ability to clothe and feed your still-young family, which came as an early installation. Your age and your cash meant becoming part of the world-tree.

I have never been sure about pity for the damned, but then Robert Lowell had similar concerns: "Pity the Monsters!" The personal politics of age and survival-travel is difficult. I've observed and blindly witnessed—with a shyness of stupefaction throughout—several ethnicities and social varieties of downtrodden peoples; I noticed, in one way or another, and always with my brow furrowed and my eyes squinted and my mind too heavy with it all, that they had in common more than one thing: They were all very inventive; most of them had families; and they all defied scarcity. It is an amazing thing. But the proposition itself is not difficult: They have methods. They have a habit of putting to rest all of the truly damning sureties of the politicians and financiers, of the corporate grubbers and the principals and agents of evasive third party agreements; none of those personas have methods; they have armies of stamina, and everything that comes with it, but they have no method. For me? There was always only the next contract to be agreed on: Cash for product, and its litigate conditions, mere phraseology that was warred over and warred on but never actionable (how can you make contractual conditions actionable in Nigeria with MegaCorp X?). Methods are of such gargantuan importance. It is strange though. The millennium crossed us and I don't believe we were watching. I believe that we got hit.

III

Which needs to take me back to Oakland; and the Hofbrau downtown; and the roast beef and the gravy and the root beer, sitting at the eating-stool, watching people, aware of the cashier, aware of the man slapping the sandwich together, the secular friendliness of it all. And the afternoon sun in Oakland. And the sidewalks in the sun; and the shaded area outside the Hofbrau because the sun slides down to the west not the east, walking down on the West side of the street, the Hofbrau side: One direction, north towards Berkeley, was known and understood, the other, towards the post-industrial badlands between Oakland and Alameda, was not and one never went in that direction. And the dumpsters just around the side of the Hofbrau, in even deeper shade because of the awnings of the 40's industrial brick buildings. And the pleasant walk down the street to the parking, and on the way, to Sears Roebuck and Co.

It was near to there, on the west side of the street and uptown in the business district towards Sears, that the male parishioner and Lex found themselves sitting on a bench at a bus-stop. The parishioner had a piece of political literature open; he was in the habit of carrying his favorite, often treasured (for the moment) snippets of reading around with him until he was satisfied with everything about the topic he saw there, whatever that might have meant to him; for he was not readable in those dimmer things of one's private thoughts. He spoke to you truthfully only through indirect expressions of approval or pride or scientific or geographic or political interests, of which he had many of all of those. On that day he showed me the maps in the magazine article that he pulled out of his shirt; he pointed out all of the countries around the world where the Soviets had infiltrated and now carried the dominant sphere of influence. He was trying

to tell me something that he thought was very, even, in his mind, profoundly important: It was an expression of his need to look after himself as a person whom he believed was able to care, even in the desert of his own unhappiness and self-doubt; in the sense actually that he had no one else to love except me and the female parishioner. He didn't do this with anyone else, certainly not with his own children. But he did it with me and the female parishioner all the time. I never fully understood the man, I never will; that saddens me deeply, it is a loss to me, the universe implodes right there for me—it turns the Bible to dust, and I disdain its purport: I am not stupid in these things, and I refuse to be, especially when it concerns either of the parishioners.

Still, as a young boy however, at that time, I just knew that the man's intellect was cosmic but limited by something I could not name then, but knew was present, and that I can name now: A bigotry that he did not understand himself, or it may be that he could not, whether by the necessity and general order of things, or as a condition that may have been ticking away in his innermost persona, below the tickings of grey matter, and not accessible even to one's unique but quite possibly epiphenomenal self; the entity by which one judges oneself and on which one is judged by others. Because in the latter case, no typical target of bigotry would ever have noticed it in my grandfather—and they never did, or if they did they sure did not let on, because everyone got on gaily, as gaily as people can get on; the parishioner was of that element.

In the hours before his father died his father was declared comatose; and it was only a matter of hours since the parishioner had gotten him to the hospital. The old parishioner said that his old man's eye had twitched and blinked open, then-close when the parishioner looked away from the doctor and towards and at his father. He told me that he could never be sure whether it was a muscle-reflex or an intended act in the very sight of his son, and done to and for his son; the old wink, the old nod, as old as cultural man; for me, Rembrandt's image of King Arthur at his round table with his knights, and his sword held up with his whited-out and almost blinded right eye in the severe duration of its closure, defying sordid human nature with that very nature itself—total defiance, incongruous with how men prefer to understand life, for which they have no preference in the first place.

His old man died that night, on Christmas Eve. Every year the old parishioner brooded that night but showed no intent of wishing others to comment, or necessarily of even to notice—I don't think he cared either way; he was quiet at the head of the table in his large and dominant house, always dazed on that night, and looking around the table as if he did not know where he was; while his adult children squawked like dumb geese and passed the sweet potatoes and sipped on white wine.

The old parishioner was not as solemn as death itself, which marks a difference, but he was solemn on things. Geology, geography, paleontology, botany, and African cultures. He could name the American colloquial or the generic Latin of every flower in California, Montana, Nevada, Idaho, and God only knows where else. He was genuinely delighted by the beauty of fauna and flora, he could become enthusiastically verbal and then quietly engaged with the specimen itself in his hands or in the closeness of his sight, and the difference, the change, from the one to the other was not noticeable to people who witnessed him, and

conversed with him, and listened to him: (He was charming, in other words, and it caged many a woman's poor mind; the female parishioner was too cunning to let it shake her, and too intelligent not to acknowledge the bitchery in a manner that anyone could ever declare themselves witnesses to, and that's how she appeared; she was light-years ahead of any of them in generic and specific knowledge, especially the ones with feigned intellects or doctorates or characteristically, both). For me this made him the instinctive conservationist that he truly was, in my mind as only the early members and founders of the Audubon Society were; it's no surprise that that was his favorite membership-society, whom over the decades he consistently sent checks to.

I have his physics notes from his Stanford days; he's got relativity in there, and in the text-book as well as I've verified because I possess it; it was at a time when Einstein was still considered a victor of the power of the human imagination but not more—if there is more than that (and which was used as a pejorative against Einstein in any event, an important event as it turned out to be). The parishioner was solemn. He was not easily understood, not least to himself. He was cosmic, his intellect was universal, but he was in many ways a failure as a human being. Although he did not fail me, and that is a true fact. It is all I care about; let the other dead bury their own dead.

Jesse Patton. Robert Patton, father. Adoption. Courtship.

1875-1899 generation:

(1) LAST COLONIALS

(2) MILLERS

Children of:

Parents of: PARISHIONERS

1900-1914 generation:

(1) FDRCOM

(2) WWIIADVANTWASPS, then KORCOMS, then VNGENPACS;

Children of:

Parents of: KORYWASPS

1915-1929 generation:

(1) FIRST PARISHIONERS

Children of: LAST COLONIALS

(2) SECOND PARISHIONERS

Parents of: BABIES, then VNCOMS

(2)

1930-1944 generation:

1945 generation: babies; children of the parishioners

1960 generation.

1975 generation.

1990 generation.

The manner of my grandfather's death.

Milk 40 years old. Aged, then going—died 1978, at 48.

The writer and diarist Andre Gide. Polish laborer story

In an uncanny way Tolstoy adapts his art to meet every exigency of the human
natures he describes